

Stevia

Scientific Name: Asteraceae

Common Name: Stevia

Historical Perspective: Stevia is a plant that belongs to the daisy family. Stevia was discovered in Paraguay in 1887. England used it as a sweetener during WWI when it was cut off from sugarcane supplies from the Caribbean. Stevia has been used as a sweetener for years in South America and Japan (since the mid-1970's in Japan). Other countries that use it regularly include Taiwan, China, Malaysia and South Korea. None of the countries that use Stevia regularly as a sweetener have reported any adverse health effects from the sweetener.

Common Uses: Stevia is often used as sweetener in foods and beverages; it is approximately 300 times sweeter than table sugar, so very little of it is needed to sweeten foods and beverages. Because of this, it is considered to provide little if any calories (much like the artificial sweeteners saccharin and aspartame).

Investigational Uses: Stevia may have a hypoglycemic effect (lowers blood sugar) and a hypotensive effect (lowers blood pressure); however, specific doses of the herb must be taken for this effect, and few studies have been done.

Form(s) Used: Stevia is available in a powder (may be greenish in color), liquid (4:1 in water), in its crude leaf form, in its dried crude leaf form, in capsules and in combination with other herbs or teas. The liquid and powder forms are usually used to sweeten foods.

Common and/or Recommended Dosage: As a sweetener, 3-4 teaspoons of Stevia powder (may be white or may be green in color) is equal in sweetness to approximately 1 cup of sugar. The amount used depends on the level of sweetness a person desires and the form of stevia used. In the liquid form, 2-3 drops may be all that's needed to sweeten tea for example. In the powder form, only 1/16 of a teaspoon may be needed to sweeten tea.

Potential Side Effects: Stevia may cause dizziness, headache, muscle weakness, bloating, nausea, muscle tenderness and kidney toxicity (only seen in hamsters given intravenous doses of steviol, a component of stevia).

Food Drug Interactions: Stevia may interact with diabetes medications by causing a low blood sugar and it may interact with high blood pressure medications by causing a very low blood pressure (especially calcium channel blockers and diuretics).

Contraindication to Use: As with any herb, it is not recommended that any woman who is pregnant or breastfeeding use this herb, nor is it recommended that children use it.

Research Data on Safety and Efficacy: Research has been limited thus far, especially in the U.S. Studies in Brazil showed a blood sugar lowering effect of stevia when patients were given 20 grams a day. A study in China showed a blood pressure lowering effect with doses of 250 milligrams of stevioside (a component of stevia) twice a day

Bottom-Line: Given the long history of safe use of this product in other countries, this product is likely safe to use. Find reputable sources, and if you are allergic to the daisy family, you may want to use this product with caution to ensure its safety for you.

References:

1. *Professional's Handbook of Complementary and Alternative Medicines, Second Edition*, Fetrow C.W., Avila J.R. Springhouse 2001.
2. *Today's Dietitian*. Stevia: A Bumpy Road For An Ancient Herb. Great Valley Publishing, Co. Inc. December 2001.
3. www.stevia.com